**and yet the notes recur**

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# and yet the notes recur

by strikerbacks

Summary

It's easy to watch Todd, he realizes, because they're both watching Neil.

Notes

happy yuletide, recip! ♥ i was really happy to get to write dps again after so long and i hope you enjoy!

title comes from *october* by louise glück.

See the end of the work for more notes

"It's gotta be hard, starting at a new school senior year," Neil says out of the side of his mouth as they search the stacks.

The library's the last place Charlie wants to be — the bite of autumn's wind hasn't fully set in yet, there's still spots of summer outside he'd rather run around in. But he's still revelling in being back with his friends, and of course a brain like Neil already wants to pick out the research books for their first history paper of the term, so he agrees to join him in the godforsaken library on a perfectly good Friday afternoon. The sacrifices he makes for them, honestly.

They hadn't seen each other at all over the summer break. For the first time in the five years since Neil showed up at Welton, he couldn't manage to drag his friend off to spend a week at the Dalton estate, nicking bottles from his father's liquor cabinet and biking down to the lake to waste the entire day away lounging in the sun. *My father is keeping me too busy*, Neil had explained in the only letter Charlie received that summer. *You know how it is.*

Charlie shrugs one shoulder, squints up at the highest shelf Neil's eyeing. "Sure, but you saw him in Nolan's office. The guy couldn't string together a sentence. They're gonna eat him alive here."

Neil raises up onto his toes and skims his long fingers along the dusty spine of a book before pulling it down. He reaches over without looking, carelessly smudges the dust across Charlie's vest. "Which is why we're gonna help him out. Show him the ropes." He grins then— annoyingly, Neil's only gotten more handsome every year, and his once too-wide smile has transformed into a bright, arresting thing. "C'mon, Charlie. He's not that bad."

"Didn't say he was," Charlie bristles and lowers his voice after hearing a shush somewhere behind them. "All I'm saying is I don't think we're gonna be able to save him from pissing himself the first time Hager gives him a demerit for breathing wrong."

Neil pauses, thinks it over, then bobs his head in acquiescence. "Probably not. But we have to try."

Charlie watches him from the corner of his eye in their classes. Head down, eyes resolutely on his paper, hand flying back and forth as he takes meticulous notes. Doesn't raise his hand once. He gets called on anyway in Latin and barely manages to splutter out a conjugation, but at least it's correct.

Neil props him up at every turn, practically puppets him after trigonometry when Dr. Sutton asks if he thinks the curriculum is up to snuff compared to Balincrest— but by the time their first soccer practice rolls around, he's nowhere to be seen. He and Knox have made an impressive duo on the wings for two years now, and they're already off to school some of the younger players.

Todd stands off to the side of the field, fists balled at his sides and eyes roving nervously about for a full three minutes before Charlie decides that he might as well do his good deed of the week today.

"Anderson," he calls out from where he stands in goal, a pair of gloves tucked under his arm. He turns to look, deer in headlights, but doesn't move. Charlie waves him over until he finally dislodges himself from the spot. He shoots a fearful glance to their coach, who's paying no attention, before ducking his head down and hustling over. "What position did you play at Balincrest?"

"I— well, I was in midfield, but I—" He stammers out a few nonsense syllables and Charlie forces himself to just nod along, wait it out. Let him actually get to what he's saying. Finally, red in the cheeks, Todd manages to get out, "But I was— I mean, I didn't... It wasn't for me. I don't like to run."

Against all odds, Charlie laughs, one loud resounding sound. "No shit? Me neither. Why do you think I'm goalie?" A fleeting smile flickers across Todd's face, and distantly Charlie realizes this is the first time they've exchanged more than a few words without Neil edging his way in. "Alright, what about defense? You can stay in the last third, mostly."

Todd nods, then practically flinches when the coach blows his whistle and calls for them to gather around. Charlie claps him on the shoulder and turns him around, pushes him along toward the circle of boys. "When he asks, just say you were a centre back. That's it. Two words."

He half-expects Todd to balk at the idea of *lying* to an *authority figure*, but strangely enough, he doesn't. He smiles again, grateful, and does

exactly as Charlie says.

It sounds dramatic to say Keating's classes give them a reason to look forward to the next day, but they're teenagers. Of course they're dramatic.

Charlie has well and truly never given a shit about school before this. Sure, he's always gotten decent grades and even excelled every now and then when he could be bothered to put in the effort, but on the whole— not his thing. School is just a means to an end. Life happens outside the Hellton hallways, he's been convinced of that since he was a kid.

Keating shows him he's wrong: There is life in every corner of every moment of every day, there is endless possibility here, in all things, not just in the world waiting for them after graduation. Sure, he still has to sit through Latin lectures and toil over trigonometry assignments, but that same sense of wonder that runs through Keating's classes starts to trickle over to the rest of them. For the first time, he's hungry to learn.

Though he's still not without his biases. He props his chemistry textbook up to hide his copy of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and winks when Knox notices. Keating took him aside and told him to read the first two cantos over the course of the week, come to his office on Sunday morning to discuss. Charlie's already read the whole thing through twice over.

"I want to be a Byronic hero," he tells the Society that night, cocksure and proud and so very adolescent.

Cameron snickers. "More like a moronic hero."

"Can it, *Dick*." He leans over so Meeks can light his cigarette with the same match he just used on his own pipe, inhales and then blows the smoke directly toward Cameron's face. He coughs and whines underneath all their laughter, *aw Jesus Charlie my hair's gonna smell like an ashtray*, and across the cramped cave he catches sight of Todd

writing it in his notebook: *Byronic hero*.

He's seen Todd in the library, perusing the stacks with a list of poets written from their last meeting. He's seen him with his head bent low over the books, copying lines back into that same notebook. He's seen him mouthing silently through the words.

He sits perched on the trunk at the foot of Neil's bed, methodically flipping his Zippo open and closed again and again as Neil reads him the letter. Succinct, to the point, has a clear vision and executes it. *I am writing to you on behalf of my son, Neil Perry*. His eyes are bright and manic when he looks up expectantly.

"Alright, editor, give me your notes," he grins.

Charlie smirks back. "Take out the part about theatre being an enriching experience. Nobody's father's gonna say that."

Neil furrows his brow, rereads the letter silently and then turns back to the typewriter with a sigh. "No, you're right, you're right," he says as he lines up a new sheet of paper. "That was too much. The simpler the better."

"Did you hear that, Anderson? I'm right. Music to my ears." Todd's been watching them from the corner where his bed meets the wall, math notes scattered around him. He meets Charlie's eyes, unamused. "What, did you already give him your edits too?"

"Just one," Neil answers for him without looking up from where he's punching the keys. "He thinks it's a bad idea."

"Neil—" But he waves one hand through the air and Todd's words immediately die on his tongue. He sets his mouth in a thin line and returns to his notes.

Charlie's in Neil's corner, no matter what, one hundred percent of the time, especially when it comes to going against his father, but still—he finds himself wanting to tell Todd, yeah, it probably *is* a bad idea.

But Neil's allowed to make one singular choice for himself. It's just a couple months of rehearsal, a few shows, and he'll be done by Christmas. Is it risky? Sure. But it'll be alright.

Which is strange in its own right. He usually doesn't feel the need to reassure people like that.

Despite what the administration might think, Mr. Keating isn't changing most of them. They've always been this way, winding themselves up tighter and tighter until they can finally spring forth into the world. Charlie's incessant drumbeat of rebellion against his ribs, Knox's burning desire for romance, Neil's exuberant spirit that can't be confined by everyone's expectations of him. Keating stokes the fires they've been slowly and carefully tending for years, points them in a direction and gives them permission to go. Make waves, get the girl, audition for the play. Whatever it takes, just *be alive*.

But Todd, Charlie realizes as he watches him come up with a brilliant poem on the spot with nothing more than Keating to guide him— Keating *is* changing Todd. It's like watching a chemical reaction in progress, the way confidence flares up suddenly in him before he panics and tamps it back down. But it keeps coming back, measure by measure, and it stays a little bit longer every time— Charlie sees it in small ways. In the way Todd relaxes and laughs more easily when they're all gathered together in the common room, talking smack and cracking jokes. In the way his shoulders don't hunch up around his ears anymore when one of them says his name. In the way he actually starts volunteering details about his life, even small ones — *I want to try rowing in the spring. My parents made me take waltzing lessons because I was too clumsy. Jeffrey sent me a letter from Yale.*

In the way he says, quiet but hopeful: "I found a poem. I think— well, if I can, if it's okay— I think I'd like to read it."

Everyone sits up a little straighter in the cave.

"Yes," Neil says, the word jolting right out of him. "Of course it's okay, Todd. Read it."

"This is history in the making," Meeks tells Pittsie with an elbow to his side.

Knox sweeps his arm in a grand gesture. "The floor is yours."

For a moment, Charlie expects him to lose his nerve and make a poor excuse not to go through with it, sit back down and keep his mouth shut the rest of the night. But Todd stands, cradles a book with trembling hands and reads. His voice falters here and there, but by the last line there's conviction in it: *And when they arrive they are just plain scrambled eggs and the warm weather is holding.*

At the silence that follows, he glances around the group before he goes bright red and sits down fast.

"I don't get it," Cameron declares. "Eggs?"

While they're pelting him with half-eaten biscuits and telling him to shut up, Neil leans over to jostle him. "That was good, that was really good," he's quietly enthusing. Charlie watches them, lets those words roll around in his head while he watches the way the flush climbs higher on Todd's cheekbones as he looks down at where Neil's hand lays over his forearm, and suddenly, viscerally, he thinks he understands.

Charlie's not stupid. Not by a long shot. Maybe some people think he is, just because he's governed by the whims of his passions, but he sees more than they realize. And he's catalogued a lot about Todd in the short time he's known him — the way he sits close enough to Neil that their shoulders press up against one another, the way he wanders with him through the grounds to help him run his lines, the way he stares after him when he's rhapsodizing about Shakespeare or Whitman or Auden, the way he speaks extra quietly in the cave so that Neil has to bow his head in close just like he is right now.

It's easy to watch Todd, he realizes, because they're both watching Neil.

(The summer after their sophomore year, he kisses Neil soundly on the mouth.

It isn't the first time for either of them— not in general, anyway. But the first time with each other, and the first time with another guy, and no one could call it all that graceful.

Daltons are famous for their summer garden parties; Neil's gotten used to packing a suit just in case his visit happens to overlap. It usually does. Charlie likes having him around as a buffer. This one goes particularly long into the evening and as all the guests peter out and his parents tidy up inside, he looks at Neil in his navy blue button down with the sleeves rolled up in the sticky summer heat, jacket slung over his shoulder, profile lit by the lanterns they're supposed to be putting out, and a thought comes to him, wild, unbidden: *I want to kiss him*.

And what a Dalton wants, a Dalton gets. So he does, in the shadowed corner of their back garden, clumsy and inelegant and confused, but fierce. Determined.

It happens a few more times after that, once they get back to school: In the luggage room where they sneak away to smoke and gossip shamelessly about everyone else. In Charlie's room while Cameron is at honor council. Down at the dock on the lake, between the trees in the woods, at the great yawning mouth of the cave when they first discover it. Once, outside the showers after gym class when they're sure everyone else has gone, droplets of water still clinging to Neil's fringe.

All the while, they still talk about the girls they know, girls they wish they knew, still go about business as usual. Charlie never thinks to question it. Neil's his best friend, the best person he knows — this is just an extension of that, of this boundless affection he's always had, too wanting for his own good.

And Neil's keen on it. Charlie *knows* he is. But before their brief break for Thanksgiving, he sits in the grass by the soccer field with Charlie and tells him they can't. This— this thing they've been doing, because he can't name it, that just makes it real and that much worse, so he leaves it as this nebulous and confusing *thing* — they can't. *He* can't. His father wouldn't approve, and he needs to focus on his schoolwork, they're already talking about making him go to summer sessions — and it's dumb, anyway, right? Messing around with each other like this. Who do they think they're kidding? They're not like that.

Charlie stares at him, all lanky limbs and apologetic smiles and reiterations that they're friends, Charlie is his best friend, he doesn't want to lose a friend over something as stupid as this.

"You don't really believe all that," he finally says, and it's not a question.

The corners of Neil's mouth pinch in, teeth catching the inside of his cheek before he looks away, into the sunset. They need to get back inside before dinner. When he looks back, he's smiling again, the same sad-eyed, tight-lipped smile he gets when they talk about their fathers' plans for their future. He shrugs, exhales heavily through his nose and blinks a little too hard.

"We can't," he says, but it's different than before — not *we can't do that*, but *we can't believe that.*)

Todd lingers in the common room long after the crowd of boys has dispersed. It's not curfew yet, but Keating's reprimand put them all in their places a bit. The only reason Charlie's not gone to bed yet is because it still hurts to move.

He watches as Todd shuffles his stack of books, opens up their history text and his notebook before pausing and turning to face him. He swallows hard, working up all his courage just to ask, "Do you want a book?"

Charlie blinks placidly. "Like... in general?"

"No, I mean—" Todd grimaces and tries again. "The book I read from. Do you want it? I think you'd like it."

That was weeks ago, so it takes Charlie a moment to remember, but then— "Oh yeah, your poem," he grins. "Are they all about eggs?"

"Get lost," Todd snorts, but he's smiling now too as he pulls a slim paperback from between his textbooks. He smooths one nervous hand over the cover. "It's due back next week, so don't forget."

Charlie lays one completely sincere hand over his heart. "Todd Anderson," he says, "I wouldn't *dream* of dishonoring your good name with demerits for overdue books." It hits him square in the chest and Todd turns back to his studying. The companionate silence between them is something of a comfort; he's been thriving off all the attention since his phone call to God stunt, of course, but a moment of reprieve is nice too.

Not every poem in it speaks to him, but it's an easy enough read, and he flips through the pages until he gets to the last: *Now I am quietly waiting for the catastrophe of my personality to seem beautiful again, and interesting, and modern.*

He looks up. The back of Todd's head gives nothing away. Charlie rubs his fingers back and forth over that line, opens his mouth to say something, then — for once — thinks better of it.

Society meetings peter out a bit as winter creeps in — the nights are long and cold, they're loaded down with end of term work and Neil's rehearsal schedule is in full chaotic swing. Charlie still tries to make it out to the cave once every few days, just to have somewhere to escape to and clear his head. Normally he can drag a couple of them along, especially with the promise of his dad's pilfered booze and some smokes, but tonight his only taker is Todd.

"You don't have to go if you don't want to," Charlie shrugs, because one-on-one time doesn't seem to be Todd's thing with anyone but Neil.

He throws Charlie a funny look as he buttons up his coat and winds the thick scarf around his neck. "I said I wanted to, didn't I?"

Charlie smirks. "I like you better now that you talk back."

"Of course you do, Nuwanda."

It's disarming. The name sounds so sincere coming from him — there's always the slightest edge of derision when it comes from anyone else. Charlie lets that thought warm him up as they trundle through the

snowy woods, silent but for their own footfall.

"Drink," Charlie says as soon as they're inside the cave, and Todd scoffs. "I'm serious, drink. It's fucking cold out here." He plunks down next to Todd, uncaps the flask and pushes it up under his nose. The way Todd winces from the sudden stinging scent of alcohol makes him look like a fussy cat.

"The play is soon," he says after they've passed the flask back and forth a couple times, now bourbon-warm from the inside out. Charlie caps it again — he's gotta make it last through finals before he can go home and replenish his stores, after all, and this is valuable currency when it comes to Meeks writing his Latin essays for him — and hums noncommittally as he taps out two cigarettes. He's got both in his mouth to light at once when Todd goes on, "Do you think Mr. Keating will let us have a party for Neil after?"

Charlie laughs around the cigarettes and passes one to Todd before taking a drag. "I mean, we don't *have* to tell him we're having a party," he points out. "Also— we're having a party?"

The tip of Todd's nose is red from running through the cold. "I figured we should celebrate somehow..."

"I like the way you think," Charlie grins and musses his hair with one gloved hand. Todd's smile is secretive but proud of himself and he bats idly at the smoke rings Charlie's blowing. "Yeah, I mean, who knows? Keating might even join us. Seems like something he'd do."

No matter where their conversation goes that night, it always circles back to Neil. Charlie's used to that — he's always been their leader, their focal point, all roads lead back to Neil Perry in the end — but he can't ignore the way it tugs at his gut now. Todd's a good guy. Really good. Innocent, in his way, and most likely hasn't gone through any of this before — so yeah, Charlie does feel some sort of misplaced responsibility toward him. It's funny, at the beginning of the year he was happy to write the new kid off. Now he's so preoccupied with just how badly he doesn't want to see him hurt.

Todd isn't the meek, stammering thing he was when he first arrived at Welton. Or— that's not all he is, anyway. He doesn't need to be handled with kid gloves.

"He's not gonna," Charlie says suddenly when the conversation inevitably veers toward Neil again, gesturing vaguely with his cigarette. The soft skin between Todd's eyebrows creases. "Whatever

you want from him. He won't do it."

"I don't know what you mean," Todd mumbles.

Charlie shoots him a raised-eyebrow look, all *c'mon, yes you do*. Todd returns the look, all *seriously, no I don't*. He sighs, tries a different tack.

"He'll want to do it. Believe me. He probably likes you as much as you like him," and he hadn't realized how difficult that would be to admit until just now, when it's accompanied by a low swooping sensation in his chest. He soldiers on past it. "But it's too much. It's this thing he won't let himself have."

(Then again, he thinks, Neil's already bending his own carefully constructed rules for the Society, the play. Maybe circumstances are different now. Maybe Charlie should've tried again. Too little, too late.)

The way Todd looks at him is two parts confusion, one part dawning fear.

"He's my roommate. Of course I like him."

Charlie laughs, loud and mirthless. "Jesus, Todd. Come on. It's just us. You can be honest." Then, in his best Keating impression: "Are you a man, or are you an amoeba?"

"Shut up," Todd spits, and it surprises both of them. But he soldiers on, some combination of the drink and Charlie pushing him past the edge of his comfort zone making him bold. "It's not your business. Okay? I don't know what you think I'm doing, but I'm not— I'm not *like you*."

Not many things in this world give Charlie pause. This does, the weight of those two words sinking hard and fast to the bottom of his stomach. His face must show it, because Todd looks askance and scoots away from him a little.

*Yes you are*, Charlie wants to say, *I fucking see it*, and he gets a half-mad thought just then that he should press Todd up against the wall of the cave and kiss him to make him understand. At least he's still got enough good sense left to not do that, but only barely. Charlie snuffs out his cigarette against the rock he's sitting on and lets the crumpled butt fall to the ground. Finally, he sets his jaw and knocks a knee against Todd's.

"Nobody is," he says, trying for cocky and coming up bitter instead.

They're quiet and still for a long while, until fresh snow starts to fall outside and they silently acquiesce that they should head back. Todd stands up first and reaches a hand down to help hoist him to his feet, which Charlie takes for the apology it is. They both shove their hands in their pockets, pull their scarves up around their chins and start to head out.

At the mouth of the cave, Todd stops and shuffles his feet awkwardly, like he's trying to shake off his boots before he's even stepped into the snow. Then: "I don't want anything from him," he says, "I just want him to be happy."

The part that stabs at Charlie hardest is how he sounds so, so earnest. He watches snow catch and melt on Todd's cheeks, his breath coming out in clouded little puffs, his gaze steady.

For what a shit conversation it's been, he's strangely proud. Sure, Todd's lying to himself so convincingly that even he thinks it's the truth, but at least he held his ground. At least he's not letting Charlie intimidate him into an agreement he's not ready for— or worse, silence.

The thought comes to him again, for different reasons this time: *I want to kiss him.*

Instead he reaches out, takes Todd's hand, and leads him back out to the woods.

End Notes

- quite a bit of inspiration was taken from the laserdisc version's deleted scenes, which give a little more color to life at welton and are a super fun watch if you've not seen them before. :')

- the book todd reads from is frank o'hara's meditations in an emergency. his poem is *for grace, after a party* and charlie's is *mayakovsky*.

- thank you for reading! ♥ if you'd like, you can find me on tumblr.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!